

DON LESTER, BOATSWAIN MATE, 1<sup>ST</sup> CLASS

PEARL HARBOR SURVIVOR ON THE USS. OKLAHOMA, BB.37

On my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, May 28, 1940, I went to the main Post Office to see about joining the Forest Rangers. Instead I saw a five-foot frame with a Hawaiian girl in a grass skirt with long black hair, saying "Join the Navy and see the world", so up to the recruiting office I went.

In the process of signing me up, the chief asked me how far I went to school. I said "five miles". He didn't like that answer, and squared me away. After He settled down I was shipped to Louisville, Ky., and on to Great Lakes for boot camp. After boot camp I then went to outgoing unit to wait for orders. I was assigned to maintenance. A w4 Bosum in charge assigned me a detail of men to clean up the grounds and cut grass.

I received orders to the USS. Chicago and was told that the ship was no good for me. A few days went by. My orders came in for the St. Louis- the same story- scratch again. My next orders were for the USS Oklahoma, BB.37. I was shipped to the Oklahoma in the navy yard at Bremerton, Washington. The Bosum told me the USS Oklahoma was too big and he could get me scratch. I asked him how big it was and he said "when the Oklahoma left Long Beach for Hawaii, the men on the forecastle changed into whites two days before the men on the fantail", a BIIIG ship! I dropped my sea bag on the pier, looked her over, and said to myself "she must be awfully slow".

The first time I went out to sea for sea trials there was a heavy fog and we rammed a railroad barge. I looked over the side and I could see boxcars and oil cars

floating by. A sailor behind me asked me what we hit and I said "A freight train". A few months later on night maneuvers off Hawaii, we rammed the USS Arizona and had a couple of other near misses.

Next came the sneak attack by the Japanese navy on 12-7-41. At this time Captain Foy had been transferred and was relieved by Captain Bodie (more on this later). My general quarter station was on the 5 in 25 Anti Aircraft Battery. I was on the third deck aft, at the carpenter shop. The word was passed at 0755 G.Q. There wasn't much movement at first, then the famous word was passed "GENERAL QUARTER, THIS IS NO SHIT, THE JAPS ARE ATTACKING US!"

The torpedoes were coming into the port side of the ship. The ship was lurching with each hit. I started making my way to a strickers hatch "trunk". There was a vertical ladder welded to the inboard bulkhead. A boatswain mate 2<sup>nd</sup> class named Washam was in charge of the repair party at the hatch. I told him I had to get to my G.Q. station. He told me to stand fast, so I stood fast. The ship was rolling over quickly. The man on the phones said "all lines are dead, abandon ship!" Washam said, "let's go". Since he had a 45 pistol strapped on, he went first. The vertical ladder was now horizontal.

As I got to the main deck, water was slipping into the hatch, which was 5 to 6 feet to starboard. Swimming hard, I got clear of the ship, but not far enough away, as I was pulled helplessly and very quickly to the bottom. Going down could feel my hair being pulled straight up. From my feet up to my knees I felt a temperature change, possibly because of the mud at the bottom. When the ship hit bottom, the results were reverse; I was now being blown back to the surface.

I met Washam in a bank forty years later. That was when I found out who was at the hatch on the third deck and in charge of repair #3. Our story about going down with the ship to the bottom was the same.

My first look at Battleship Row with the Oklahoma rolled over, I was angry- not scared. I swam over to a group of survivors hanging on to two pontoons of our seaplane, and got a short breather before it sank to the bottom. As I was floundering around in the water, Wes Potts swam up to me with two planks under his arm and gave me one, a lifesaver, I'm sure. We parted ways to meet again at a ship reunion, many years later. With my plank I started moving toward the Oklahoma when an officer's motor boat, loaded with survivors took a direct hit from a high altitude bomber. I was hit by a small piece of shrapnel.

I realize now that I was going back into the target area. So much was happening in such a short time. Seeing the Oklahoma rolled over, the Arizona explosion, the forward of the West Virginia sinking, oil on fire and to see a Japanese torpedo plane coming in so low you could see the gold in the pilots teeth, these are things you remember.

With my plank, I turned away from Battleship Row. A short time later a motor launch loaded with survivors was moving slowly toward me. Thinking I would be picked up, and then realizing I was not, I saw the boats stern line trailing in the water. Turning the plank loose, I grabbed the line. It was covered with oil. I took a round turn on my wrist and hung on. I was towed out of the oil into clean water, partly to wash me off then someone spotted me. The boat stopped and I was pulled aboard. We were dropped off at the sub base and sent to sick bay to clean up and be checked out. I received a patch on

my hip and was sent to the lucky bag. I picked out a mixed uniform and returned to the dock where I loaded stores on subs getting ready to get underway. Returning to the sub barrack, I heard my name called out. Tuning, I saw Captain Foy. We were well acquainted with each other after "16 captain's mast"; I even knew his favorite drink, Cavalry special. I made sure it was my favorite drink.

Captain Foy gave me orders to notify as many men as I could, to meet with him at 1800 hours at the sub base. The captain was in a boat going to the USS Oklahoma. Knowing Captain Bodie, he was not aboard. He had returned to the sub base after it rolled over. The word got around and there was a good turn out. Captain Bodie started his speech by saying he felt like a jinx to the ship: Ramming the barge in Puget-sound, the collision and near collision on a night maneuver off Hawaii, then to see her roll over and die was a sad ending to a good captain.

At 2400 hours I volunteered for the USS Phelps (dd-360). Getting under way at 0400 hours. While patrolling around the island, we returned to Pearl Harbor for 2 hours picking up stores and fuel. After that we were underway for the south pacific, not returning to Hawaii until April, 1942.

DON LESTER: 7-19-03

Don was in 6<sup>th</sup> division. He was on the number 5 gun. 5"/25. First loader. Fixed ammunition. Projectile and powder were together. Gun crew: two loaders, pointer, trainer, gun captain. Projectile would come up from the magazine or out of the magazine box. Set it in a fuse box. Crank the fuse box over to set the fuse. First loader hit a pedal to pop it out of the fuse box. Turned around to lay it into the breech. Bouncing around a little bit. Keep your right hand on it until the captain hit the rammer spade. When it started moving you pull your hand back out and get the next one ready. Shell could bounce up and lock without going in. It could damage the fuse and then you would have to throw it over the side. The only way the projectiles would go off was by centrifugal force. They had a bendix timer inside. Rifles in the gun would send the projectile on its way in a spiral. The centrifugal force of the spiral would open a little chamber. The shell had a timer in side. At the arranged time a little device like a cigarette lighter would set off a little spark that would enter through the chamber and explode the projectile.

Each gun had a ready box. Each ready box carried maybe 15 shells. They struck all the ammunition below on Friday and also the firing mechanisms.

He was on the third deck in the carpenters shop. Visiting a friend down there when they passed the word for general quarters. He never made it to his battle station. There was a strikers hatch that had a vertical ladder attached to the inboard bulkhead. He got to the hatch. There was a second class boatswain mate there with a 45 strapped on him. Worshum was standing at the hatch. Don said he wanted to get to his battle station on the boat deck. Ship had already started rolling. Worshum said there was nothing he could do on the boat deck. Told him to stand face. Repair Station 3. Had a man on the sound powered phone that passed the word to abandon ship. Worshum. Third deck is below the armored deck. Armored deck is the overhead for the third deck. Worshum went up the hatch, Don was right behind him. It goes up through the chief's quarters and comes up behind turret 4. On starboard side of centerline. When they got to the hatch water was shipping in. Ship was over 90 degrees. Eight to ten feet off centerline. Realized there was a danger of being pulled below. He was just barely far enough away to where he wasn't pulled under. The suction pulled him down. He remembered feeling the change of water temperature as he was drawn downward. He was still close to the side. Said he was pulled to the bottom. Didn't know if it was his feet going down into the mud or the water temperature changing but he could feel it going up to his knee. His hairs was standing straight up because he was going down so fast. Their was a blowback when she hit bottom, just the opposite of what she did going down. He was blown back up out of the water. Hair came back down over his head. Forty years later Don ran into Worshum at a bank. When he resurfaced he saw a seaplane sitting upside down, pontoons floating on the surface. 15 to 20 guys holding on the pontoons. Then suddenly the pontoons filled up with the water and the pontoons sank. He was being strafed at the time. Ray turned loose of the pontoon and started to swim away. Saw a torpedo plane headed for battleship row. Could see pilot haging out the cockpit of his plane. Don said he could see the gold in his teeth. Torpedo probably headed for the West Virginia. Arizona had already blown up. Floundering in the water. Potts who was also in the 6<sup>th</sup> division. Don knew him well. Potts was a coxswain. Potts was floating with a couple of planks, one under each arm. Wimming with the planks under his arsm. Plankds were polished. Might have been from the gangway. Potts gave him one. They split up and started swimming away. Don headed for Oklahoma. Saw one of his buddies standing on the bottom with Kenworthy and Red Carver (Tarvert). Don headed toward the Okie. Off to his right was an officers' boat that was filled with survivors. It took a direct hit from a bomber. Bomb dropped on battleships but missed. He could see body parts going through the air. Decided he was heading in the wrong direction. Started back toward the middle of the channel. Motor lauch cmae by that was going pretty slow trying to avoid things in the water, loaded with survivors too. He thought it was going to pick him up but it went on by. Stern line was dragging through the water behind it. Don grabbed hold of the line and wrapped it around his wrist. Nobody saw him. Force of the tow cleaned the oil off his clothes. Someone saw him. Boat stopped. Pulled Don in the boat. Someone noticed that he was bleeding. Piece of schrapnel in his hip. Pulled it out and tossed it over the side. Went to sub base. Got cleanted up, went to first aid. Went to Lucky bag. He had junked all his clothes when he was in the water. Just had his skivvies and undershirt on. Went to the dock at the sub base. Starte loading supplies on a sub. 9:00 or 9:30. Sailors firing at planes with 30-30 rifles. Went to the barracks at the sub base. Foy recognized him called him over. Don had been to a couple of Cpatain's masts so foy knew him. Foy told Don to go around the base and round up all the Okie sailors he could find and with instructions for them all to meet back at the sub base at 1800. Foy wanted to talk to them. Spent the day at the Navy yard. Met quite a few of the guys and told them to pass word. Met the mail orderly, a second class boatswain mate. They use to fly him off the ship in a plane to go pick-up mail while they were at sea. He'd already been over to the post office, picked up a couple bags of mail. Don said he'd lost it a little bit. Was sitting under a palm tree sorting the mail. Don sat down and talked to him for awhile. At 1800 quite a few of the guys showed up to see the captain. Foy gave a speech, felt he was a jinx. The first time Foy went out they rammed the train barge in Bremerton (Pudget Sound). Pilot was taking them out. Fog was real thick. All they could see was box cars and oil cars going by. Rammed the Arizona during night maneuvers later. Destroyers

going every which way to get out of the way. Enterprise incident. Flag staff was bent down 90 degrees. Overhang of the flight deck. Don was on the boat deck. Enterprise just cleared the gun shield on the boat deck. He was also the Captain when they cracked the shaft. Don remembered that Nevada was with them. Supposed to go into Long Beach. Nevada did not tow them. Divers wrapped a cable around the shaft to hold it against the ship. Two tugs greeted them at San Francisco. Back at sub base. At 2300-2400 they passed the word asking for volunteers for destroyers. Joined the Phelps, DD-360. got aboard about 0100. Phelps didn't have a full battle crew. Before the war they did not carry enough men to stand four on, four off watches. None of the ships did.

Secretary of Navy told Richardson to apologize to the president. Richardson said he was wasn't going to tell him who he should or shouldn't apologize to.

Three ships in Pearl Harbor, three shipping out to relieve the ones at sea, three at sea. This was Richardson's system. 300-500 mile patrols. Patrol for a week. Don doesn't remember ever seeing six battleships in the harbor at one time. Stopped when Kimmel took over. Don recalls that all of the battleships were in most of the time. No more patrols. Just maneuvers. Phelps left at 0400 Monday morning. Patrolled off of Pearl, bringing ships in, sounding for subs, escort ships to channel then go back out. Out for ten days. Got orders to come in. Stayed in port for only two hours to pick up fuel and supplies. No liberty.

First class chiefs had their families ashore. Wife was having a baby. Boatswain mate First Class named French (not Howard). When they tied up French went to the division officer saying his wife was going to have a baby. Division Officer said no liberties. They're bringing in the lines when French comes running down the pier. Going to escort a convoy to Australia. French came up on the forecastle, was standing by the special sea detail, drops anchor while in channel if necessary. Ensign asked French if it was a boy or a girl. French said if everything comes out all right he would let him know in nine months. Ensign ended up being an admiral.

Don was later transferred to the Bancroft (DD-598). Went to the Aleutians. Watched the Warden go on the rocks and break up and sink. Dewey, another destroyer went in to help out. Nevada came up later. Cruiser Astoria lost sea suction. Went dead in the water. Destroyers laid a smoke screen. Four destroyers made a torpedo run on the Jap fleet. Ran them into Russian waters.

Went to Okinawa. Was with the landing group that went in on the third of April. Logistics support unit. Was there until the war ended. C-47 was mail plane going from Philippines to Tokyo. War was over. Don bummed a ride. Navigator told them to come forward, no seats. Going to drop down to 250 feet to fly over Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Ground looked like it was white from the heat.

Don joined the Navy at 18. Don's brother wrote him in June of 2003 to tell him that he was high school wanted to give him a diploma. His brother received his diploma for him. Don wrote a bio that the principal read to the school. Don was trying to find a way to get to Denver to join the Forest Rangers. He had to pay his own way. He went to the post office to see if there were any trucks head that way that he would catch a ride with. As he approached the post office there was a 5' a-frame, a poster with a picture of a Hawaiian girl with a grass skirts, a lae, long black hair, red cape, said Join the Navy and see the world. That was it, he forgot about the Forest Rangers and joined the Navy. He told the recruiter, a chief. Chief asked him how far he went to school. Don told him five miles. Went to boot camp at Great Lakes. Had to have his tonsils removed. About fifteen waiting in line at sickbay to have tonsils removed. Walked into a room. Guy had a high chair. Doctor had an apron that was solid with blood. Corpsman looked the same. Sat up in a high chair, but a bib around him. Doctor told him to start panting like a dog to keep from

swallowing blood. Stuck a little wire loop down his throat and sheared his tonsils off and dumped it in the trash can. Didn't even deaden it.

Went in on May 28, 1940. Assigned to Okie in September 1940. Boarded her at Bremerton. Boastwain in charge of maintenance took a liking to Don because of his size. He was supposed to go aboard the Chicago. Boatswain said Chicago was not a good ship. A week later he was supposed to go aboard the St. Louis. Scratched him off that one. Next was Okie. Not a cruiser like the other two. He told him he had orders for the Oklahoma. Boatswain said it was too big. Said it was so big that sailors on the forecastle changed into whites two days before the guys on the fantail does.

Atkins, a first class, was in charge of the AA batteries?

Don said they always circled Ford Island. Don never heard of being turned around. "Winding ship" is when a ship is turned around. Tugs turned them around once. In San Diego. Don didn't understand why as they could always drop anchor and spin around.

Don didn't recall being at drydock. Paul interjected that six ships had been at sea the week prior. Definitely more than two other ships. Paul recalls a total of five, probably because the Pennsylvania was in at dry dock..

Don said they opened all the blisters on the Okie and the Nevada. For a material inspection, an inspection crew from the Okie would inspect the Nevada and vice versa. Paul said that the Admiral would have been involved in personnel inspection but not the material inspection.

Personnel inspection. Don got his first tattoo. Inspection in skivvy shirts and shorts. Don was tallest guy in the division so everyone lined up on him. Captain Foy walked by. Moved his sleeve up a little bit. Girl tattoo was nude. Foy told him to dress it up a little bit. Next Saturday he was ashore on liberty and had a mermaid tail but on her. Foy saw it, grinned, and walked off.

Foy's favorite drink was Calvert Special. Someone from the Captain's mess told him so. Don was from Kentucky. Started drinking Calverts because the captain did.

Phelps was tied up to the destroyer tender the Dobbins on the night of the 7<sup>th</sup>. They cruised by the Okie on the way out. Okie was dark. Pitch black. People may have been working on the ship but there were no lights on. Black-out had been called. There was some light from the fires aboard the Arizona. That night there was still some bunker fuel burning.

Don thought the seaplanes sank because there were tears in the rivets from when they were broken off the ship.

Wes Potts climbed up into one of the seaplanes and tried to start it. Then got into a motor launch and spent a lot of time picking up sailors.

## DON LESTER

DON LESTER OF SAN DIEGO, CA., WAS A SEAMAN FIRST CLASS ON THE USS OKLAHOMA (BB 37) DURING THE ATTACK AND DESCRIBED HIS PERSONAL EXPERIENCES.

"THERE WAS A LOT OF HEROISM AT PEARL HARBOR. A FELLOW SHIPMATE HELPED ME SURVIVE WHILE I WAS IN THE WATER. THE SHIP (THE USS OKLAHOMA) TOOK NINE TORPEDO HITS AND ROLLED OVER. AFTER THAT HAPPENED I WAS THRASHING AROUND IN OIL COVERED WATER. HE (A FELLOW SHIPMATE) HAD TWO BOARDS, HE MOVED OVER AND GAVE ME ONE, SO I COULD HELP MYSELF TO SHORE. I MET WITH HIM FORTY YEARS LATER AT A SHIPS REUNION. THE SHIP WAS RAISED AND AFTER EXAMINATION THE PLANS FOR SALVAGING HER WERE SCUTTLED."

DON LESTER RETIRED IN 1959 AS A BOATSWAIN'S MATE FIRST CLASS AT THE NAVAL AMPHIBIOUS BASE IN CORONADO CA.

# Pearl Harbor survivor receives medal

By Howard Owens  
Daily Californian staff writer

LA MESA — What Don Lester remembers best about Pearl Harbor is feeling his hair pulled up by the suction of his sinking ship as he was dragged under water.

Lester survived that day of many 50 years ago, and Saturday he was finally recognized for it. In a ceremony at the Naval Amphibious Base on Coronado, Lester received the Pearl Harbor Survivor Medal, one of several awarded locally in recent months.

"I guess certain things stick in your mind," Lester said. "More than anything I remember when

I was pulled down by the ship — that was something you don't forget too easily."

"I was going down so fast, the thing I remember — and it's the darnest thing to remember — was my hair was being pulled straight up on my head...."

Later that afternoon of Dec. 7, 1941, he remembers watching shipmates swim ashore. They had been trapped below deck when the USS Oklahoma went down, but luckily for them they were trapped in an air pocket.

They knew, Lester said, that if they stayed in the air pocket they would eventually run out of air, so one at a time they swam 30

feet down a hatch that was supposed to go up. Once they were outside the ship, they swam to the surface.

Lester was quick to make his way overboard when the ship started to go down, and his only injury came from a piece of shrapnel that struck his leg as he swam toward an officers' motorboat. The boat, filled with about 50 sailors, Lester said, suffered a direct hit from a Japanese bomb.

About 400 of his fellow crew members died in the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Some 1,300 men were assigned to the Oklahoma.

It took just eight minutes for

the Oklahoma to sink from the time the first torpedo hit it, Lester said. The ship took hits from nine torpedoes and a bomb.

It was nice to be recognized for surviving the attack, the 69-year-old Lester said, but he also has 21 good years in the Navy to look back on and the satisfaction that the United States won the war.

"What you're proud of more than anything is the way you recover from a situation like this and go on and fight the rest of the war," Lester said. "We got off to a bad start, but it didn't take us long to get out and get going again." (hbo)